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TRANSITORY STATE: A POETRY COLLECTION

by

Lee Ellen Pottie

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2000

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I write for myself, but I also write for my father whose size twelve shoes were too big, but that did not stop me from trying to write my way into them. I also write for my daughter, Cara, because although she is not on the physical part of this journey, she travels everywhere with me in my heart. I suspect at times that she does not completely understand my poetry; however, she is the first one to ask to hear it and the first one to whom I read it.

All photographs within this manuscript are part of my personal library.

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A different celebration

*She who reconciles the ill-matched threads
of her life, and weaves them gratefully
into a single cloth—
it's she who drives the loudmouths from the hall
and clears it for a different celebration*

*where the one guest is you.
In the softness of the evening
it's you she receives.*

*You are the partner of her loneliness
the unspeaking centre of her monologues.
With each disclosure you encompass more
and she stretches beyond what limits her,
to hold you.*

...Rainer Maria Rilke

drowning

*"Drowning
No end to it"*

— Kay Smith

in grade 6, mrs stewart said, *you don't*
have a mathematical
mind, angles, percentages
are too hard for a little
girl. collective
misses and misters subdued
me to believe literature was
incomprehensible, meter
and form an iambic
gibberish drowning
me. i learned

that masculine and feminine nouns
were politically correct in french, irregular
verbs followed a regular

pattern, x times y
 over
 something equaled

the total but

they said i'd never amount
to anything

i wasted my youth waiting
to get older.

***the undergraduate experience
(or fumbling around in the dark)***

Sleepless at four a.m., my wandering
mind takes me to class, thinking
about a call for courage, the one that
encouraged me to ask a question, formulate
a response in front of learned
professors, jeering peers – the phonetic
reverberations of my voice echoing
around the room, sounding studied,
stupid. The collective professors' glazed
looks, slack jaws: *umm, hmmm*. Nodding
heads: *interesting*. Stroking
their chins: *I hadn't thought*
of it in that context before. In the dark, I blush

about answers, questions that were –
again – off-topic, off-base, off-centre
and wish someone would have courage,
audacity to say, *Huh? What the*
hell are you talking
about? or simply
Wrong!

As my body slowly wakes, I realise I was right once
in '95, three times in '97, so '99 is sure
to be an exponentially
banner year. Improvement comes with reading,
shutting up every now and then, listening.
Remarks have changed: *yup, good*
point, powerful, but I still have an out-
of-body experience when words escape.

In the end in the dark, does it matter I'm not
always right, the leg doesn't stand, responses bear
no resemblance to mainstream thought? In the end,
the fumbling darkness, toe-stubbing pain are

flashes,

a warm heat of embarrassment, lasting
only until someone
else stubs their words.

renaissance poetry

The conventions of Renaissance poetry:
The pearl-like teeth and the cherry-rose lips,
Perfect rhyme and meter – a symmetry
Of words, rhythm, form, the musical clips

That we, in days of thirty-second spots,
Fifteen minutes of fame and strobing lights,
Are too rushed to read: those plain and sweet plots
Of Donne, Greville, Sidney, King – other knights –

Those masters of the iambic meter.
Now we, once supplied with the forced choice,
Gladly read and sing of the way they were
In sublunary love and angelic voice,

The fierce gods of Greece and their concubines,
The influence of spheres, humours of man
Are too much to recount in these poor lines.
So go buy the book; it's part of the "plan."

los saludos

a dedication to...

I gave my high school education to the boy
who thought he could love
me for the rest of his life – studying
for exams on flattened green blades
leaving impressions on my back.
His father said he was too
young. He pulled
his red wagon home.

The man with impeccable timing gets
the little gold statue for my first year
of university almost consumed
by flames because he dumped
me twice: once
before mid-terms,
then just before finals.

The arts column tribute for Mr. Business
man/lover who wanted me to use
an alias – an embarrassment to his colleagues. A nod
for the year of creative writing -- he thought
I should take
business.

I raise a glass, salute the computer
with the sticky keyboard, jumpy mouse,
500 megs of papers,
poems and short essays, 300
pounds of books, coffee
headaches. Crack
open that bottle of '95
Labatt Light, drink
to the mirrored
convocation robe.

maithuna

for Cara and John Smith

Maithuna: Sanskrit for the unfulfilled
moment prior
to the kiss, love-making, an instant before
unity; an ecstasy
of anticipation surpassing
the actual act, shot

to hell after twenty-some-very-odd
years raising a daughter
to think. Now she's
listening to me
rant about black-pants, no-short-skirt dress-
codes, rules governing my
appearance at a women's
conference reading, and she
said, *you're a writer,*
a student of the arts – besides

aren't women supposed to be individual?

That moment

fulfilment was my ecstasy
for years of resistance: hearing, seeing
her non-conformity beyond
the physical resemblance
to her father

**welcome to the information economy
or full-time student with a full-time job**

Decisions! You want decisions? I want
a part-time job, a simple
no-think job to occupy
those few hours left after *Henry the Fifth*,
post-colonial theories, and Renaissance
poetry. Just a little something
to occupy two or three hours
to pay for my Kraft dinner existence
outside the crumbling brick walls surrounded by cigarette
butts and dead leaves.

I can't make decisions
about your commercials, customers,
trade shows, then hire
and fire, finish
the spreadsheet.
You want
what kind of coffee?

A job that will leave me alone
at my desk with a notebook, a mouse and
some peace. I'll decide
what sheets to spread, what
voice to use, the flow that charts
the highs and lows of productive
enlightenment not relevant to your margins
of gain or loss except
after convocation.

Hire me then to run
your errands, photocopy
my face, stand by the water
cooler, a minimum
wage serf overqualified
to answer phones, no requirement
to supervise.

the value of things

I know nothing
about the value of things
I write – I only know
a compelling fixation for words, phrases
in my head, on scraps of paper, bills, napkins –
I staple them in my book. From the shower
I may rush out, wrapped
in a towel, dripping, careful
not to splash
the keyboard, transfer
on disk the pressure of sound
bites, a tension,
afraid the words will escape
in smoke out my ears, a cartoon
character burning
with jalapinos or ideas.

Words strung together, recognition
that use of Rilke's words
is my "different celebration,"
audacity to put thoughts
on paper, expose, dance
quietly or with abandon through
high marram grass covering
dunes, wade through almost
waves or jump over breakers, scream
with paralysed excitement over
freshness of the North Shore in June,
the sting of salt, cold air.

In another place, someone
knows change, warmth, fear
of the unknown, the sweetness
of lobster meat, a lover's kiss, and
nods. Someone writes different words,

same experiences.

strange warriors

for JS, DH, SH, GM

Poet I

full-tilt boogie on Dalvay beach
no pen, paper or lap-top, just
Nikes and “gear” – a literary Olympian
barely chuffed after a 20 minute
run or a 40 minute reading
at Confederation Centre Library, he
talks of narwhal tusks and ice floes,
a strange warrior, ancient Greek
in combat boots and black turtleneck.

60 people absorb his energy,
file past in reverence, bowing,
ask for another word, more personal,
a signature. Indulgently, surrounded
by books, he gives
words away, this time
like loaves and fishes.

Poet II

Awash in landscapes
and Julian suns, broken glass
of dancing spheres, and numbers sounding
like high school locker combinations:
left—two turns, right – one. Too
many words preface and epilogue the poetry.
Just read. The words might
stand on their own.

Poet III

Stuck in the Arts Council
basement on an early spring afternoon,
zone out, watch legs and stroller wheels
pass behind the reader. Filmy curtains
do not obscure the crooked backs, run-down
shoes, and gin-stumbling.

A refined voice articulates, resonates
a thousand epic sonnets, mathematically
arranged. Zen recognition of a coffee house
in another age, eclipses
the impatience to escape
his ever-expanding,
ever-beginning universe anew.

Poet IV

Flow into Labrador summers, backyard
ice rinks and stick-handled words, the colour
of a brown-sugared river. Another incarnation
hidden in Mr. Dressup's trunk: nineteen year
old poet with an old man's
wisdom writing Terry Fox's
life from his journals. Think about dipping
your foot off the coasts of Newfoundland, B.C.,
travel his route, trace
the run-hop-skip-run of young man
whose battles with inner devils
you understand.

Poet V

Camera technique. Snapshots –
the cracks and grooves more interesting
than smooth bits. Add
acid to chemicals, swish
the paper, obscure the negative
lines. Look closely. Stand back.
The three-dimensional effect.
Colour to black and white
to colour. The grudging access.
An illusion of understanding.
The darkroom
door opens.

poetry reading

my brother showed
up in his regulation
IBM suit: navy, starched
white shirt, suspenders and Harvard-
type
tie – a habit
he seems unable to quit
even though the company is
now his

white lines

Through dusk-like gloom, lit
by flickering candles catching
the wind from the open door carrying
street voices, second-hand smoke, is
a small boy's shadow of a man.
With shaking knees, you
read your poem about breaking
free, beating the abuser.

The poet-crowd understands, those
with their own connection to locked
doors, deafening voices, no where
to run, white
knuckles on rawhide.

He is not here, not asked
because it takes courage
to face a bully you love,
harder still when you've finally
thrown a rope, a grappling
hook over the brick wall he built.

Talk publicly about the white lines on your back
when he's there and he'll think the
"I forgive" was meaningless.
Looking at me, he'll see
no forgiveness for your wounds –
those that resemble mine.

elk crossing

after Alden Nowlan's "Bull Moose"

On the spruce-bordered, constricted
highway planted
five hundred metres apart
are two signs where
the elk cross.

Norwegians,
smarter than we,
teach their wildlife
to read.

the psyche of a fish

after E. Bishop

Elizabeth caught a fish, ugly
scaly, ripped, too old
to fight her hook, smart
enough to know
the jig was up.

She looked into his eyes –
that soul's window – wrinkled
her nose at lice, five rusted
hooks dangling
from his mouth, threw
him back saluting
his longevity.

He swam away
smiling.

Pieces of my puzzle

old woman

*Vaseline, Mother said, is for babies,
old women. I'm 78, but the doctor says
I look 60. I asked your sister for
a toothbrush, face cream, a little
makeup and hairspray.*

Not Vaseline.

*Why did she
bring Vaseline? I don't
have a rash,
just a blockage
somewhere.*

*I attempt
to pacify: Perhaps sister thought it would
help. She doesn't know
birth certificates
lie. The doctor is right. Just ignore
her; she's the old
woman*

ageing

I

In my building, right by the stairs
leading to my apartment, lives
Christine: 93, spry with her silver walker,
salon-curled hair, on the phone or
watching Bill's Jamboree, with
neighbours and family visiting
daily. Her door always open,
from 9:00 am to 10:30 pm, except
when she naps.

When I go by, she waves:
"Hello, dear. How are you today?"
but I stick close to the wall, slink
around the corner, except
when my hands are full, then I don't need
an excuse. I just call out and smile,
take my time so
I don't hurt her feelings.

Christine is my grandmothers
gone before I could say goodbye.

I want to turn off the local CBC showing
birthday celebrations of the oldest Islanders.
96 or 103 – their recipes for longevity:
salt cod and potatoes, one cigarette a day,
a wee taste of CC and ginger, or the farm life.

II

Mom, never tall at four feet eleven
and some, is even shorter, bent
with osteoporosis, no longer
wears those slappy sling-backs.
She cannot hug me to her breast, she
barely reaches mine.
Her hair still the blonde of her youth, but
the metal-grey of hardship and five
children shines through. My punishment,

only her pinch keeps its strength.

My father too is bent, not the tall, handsome
man in the black and white press photos.
The hands that once wielded drumsticks rivalling
Krupa on “Sing Sing Sing” or beat
the keys of the newsroom typewriter
are now thick and slow. But the wit,
still sharp and cutting, “Not bad
for an old feller!” His hair
remains black without
Just for Men.

I have not aged. Frozen at eighteen
and in need of guidance.

I will not grow up,
and they will not die.

III

They moved Christine to Whisperwood
yesterday. The relative vultures put her
antiques and bone china in
the back seats and trunks
of their silver and cream-coloured
Cadillacs, selling the accumulation
of useless birthday and Christmas gifts
at a garage sale.

baked beans and homemade bread

The weekend paper serves up Saturday rituals:
the baked bean recipe, home made bread
hot and crusty with runny butter, my mother
bending over the oven pouring
water into the cracked brown and beige crock
that holds molasses and white beans
until tender.

I remember twelve at an indoor
skating party, silver blades sticky
on ice as my best friend said I was
dumped. She was dating the dumper who
grinned stupidly from the penalty box. Both
still came for baked beans and hot bread.

Friday's paper smells of crisp,
browned fish cakes, mashed potatoes,
Mother's salute to a life
she promised to live but didn't
when she married my father in front
of the priest. Next Friday, cod
tongues or haddock,
white sauce with hard boiled eggs.

I set clocks to the fragranced ceremonies
punctuating my mother's life:
Sunday's church and pot roast,
Monday's fresh bread, laundry
waxed floors, and leftovers.
Four sets of white shirts
starched and ironed, hanging in the closet –
all account for the visible.

Now, I realise my mother
had a secret life, where children, husbands,
dogs danced about the periphery,
letting her remember white saddle shoes,
dances at St. Mary's, a boy who died during the war,
another who got away and came back after
she was married. Sitting
on the couch broken by *him*,

she touches the spot where he sat.
I was seventeen when she needed
to unburden, told me about the touch,
the kiss.

My mother's secrets remain hidden,
thrown away like too many leftovers,
becoming compost in my mind, returning
only when I smell
yeasty, rising bread.

pieces of my puzzle

i

Flat edges form borders around
the jugged pieces. One dimension
becomes three as each segment locks
- a child's palm overlaid by a parent's.

ii

Jean Paté came from Breton shores, building
the *aboiteaux*, creating a richness from swamp-land coveted
by English governors who hunted and expelled.
Hiding in woods until he was quietly
restored, Jean fished and farmed
on the lowland rocks of an island shared
with the Mi'kmaq and Scots, back bent
guarding *l'église, la langue, la famille*.

iii

Janey Lee came from rocky Cornish bluffs
to the coast of a new found land. Her children built
schooners, trading fish for goods – Portugal, Boston States,
Cape Breton, plying
trade, making a little on the side running
rum from Saint-Pierre. Tale has it they pushed
a whale through the narrow inlet, gave name
to the rockbound/seabound village. When
schooners came in, the family revenueur watched mysterious
straw-covered packages from
the other side disappear
into the house for enjoyment later
while stories were told and songs were sung.

iv

Two families from rocky islands, no land to farm,
no fish left to eat, their houses sailing
for other ports while they stayed close
to the sea of their fathers, to where
lofty buildings mingled with milk wagons,
constructing new homes, learning new trades.

In this new place, two families merge, create
new alliances – ancient conflicts diminish.

intrusion

for Aunt Margaret

Intrusion is not the stranger on the bench
at the market, encroaching
on your space, talking in your ear or
nudging your leg under the table,

not the junk mail that becomes garbage
on the porch until Wednesday,

someone's cart
banging the back of your legs
in line. Intrusion is

a scalpel opening
where privacy lived –
a latex-gloved examination
cataloguing arteries and organs,
elements of a body open
to no one before.

Is an open casket, wing
chairs for bent siblings, a guest book
for the names of those who "wake"
but don't visit, the prevailing smell
of stale, sweet dead flowers.

An early phone call,
the unexpected death after routine
surgery.

Intrusion is a memory,
a hand and face seen
through the screen door
one week ago.

too late

Where were you when
I needed you, years ago when I
was alone, looking for Big Sister
to tell secrets to, help pick
what dress to wear, boy to date, make
decisions about the rest of my life? Now
you want to help, making judgements when
it's fifteen years too late to change.
Too late because I'm too big to sit
on the counter while we do supper
dishes, have you pull pennies
from my ears, fight over
who cleans the room. Late because I've grown up
without you, made my way.

In your poem for me – am I on
the boat or in the sand? Better,
you wrote, to be on shore, some surety in the attachment
to land – my boat may tip, may sink,
or I'll just drift with the tide. You forget: sooner
or later, the boat will move
into shore – maybe here, maybe somewhere
else – the adventure awaits, while your sandy beach
will erode, washed
by my wake.

letters to my sister

Jan. 16

Thanks for the earrings – lovely and small – suitable for modest, sweet personalities... okay, I lie, but I'm more the small type than bold. My other style is slightly bohemian / student flea market jeans and black turtleneck. When I get a real job – help! – I'll get back into the corporate look.

You've gone hip, although I do think throat tattoos are more a Hollywood / rock star kind of thing - not really for working moms. Nothing to worry about; the doctors said *probably*. What does that mean? Biopsy should be back soon, and besides, no throat cancer in our family, unless you count Aunt Kaye

Love ya,

Feb. 15

Another message from you and it's not been a month since the last one. Got my phone bill and decided anything over \$50 is too much for the unemployed student – tell Mom and Dad I'm not calling anyone for at least 2 months.

Only a few weeks until you take off for California and big bro, Doug. You deserve the trip – away from kids, whatshisname, and those idiots at work. Maybe you threaten them? Mom and Dad mentioned the temporary promotion. They're starting to realise how intelligent, competent you are. Hang in there.

Kids make decisions whether you like it or not – leave the door open. What's Jay going to do in Calgary – search for the proverbial Maritime pot of gold?

Mar. 15

News headline: **Reality bites kid**, full story at 6.
Not as much fun as he thought. What? No gold
in Alberta?

I'm sorry, but I'm glad it's your turn
to fight with Dad – so typical of him to say
nasty stuff and forget it 10 seconds later.
There were a coupla times I...

Trust you to throw that "Princess" crap
in my face again. Dad always said that he loved us
equally, so how come he called me "kitten" but hated
cats? Remember (and you should know this) don't get
between Mom and Dad – they've been working
it out for 50+ years.

Next headline: **Sara is child; you are
adult**. A good mother, wife, daughter, sister
(well, we're working on that one). Start throwing
her garbage back at her or dump it.

Just enjoy the trip. I had a call
from Doug the other day. Ended up feeling like I
should be bowing and scraping the presence
of his greatness. And on the one occasion
he didn't intimidate me. You being the middle
child between the two "monster" brothers, and me
the youngest – well we both had insecurities. Still
creep into my consciousness
from time-to-time.
I need to buy a bigger
fly swatter.

Apr. 1

Where's your sense of humour? That crap
about kitten and princess was a joke. Too
much time with Whatshisname. I forgot
to leave some room so you could
read between the lines.

Doug sent me an e-mail – he's not happy
with me, because I don't know my duties

as little sister, good daughter. I shouldn't
have thrown his escapades
in his face – not such a good example
to his kids. He didn't like being reminded
of indiscretions – horrible
that I should know he's less than
perfect, tell him I know. You'll hear
about this while you're there...

Dad called last night: he's not coming
to stay with me while you and Mom
are at Doug's. He says he's feeling
rotten. I'm worried. Maybe I can
go there for a few days, but it's the end
of term and exams next week. Why
do you both have to go?
What do we do if...

April 18

I know you're getting your e-mail
at Doug's. Dad called
just now – the ambulance
is on the way. He
can't
breathe. Tell
Mom. Flights are finished
for tonight. Driving
over to Halifax
now. So
much for you
saying Dad
was crying
wolf.

Everything
else is
unimportant.

Call me.

Touched

*That was a man beyond measure – a giant –
who forgot what the immeasurable was.*

*He was the kind of man who turns
to bring forth the meaning of an age
that wants to end.
He lifts its whole weight
and heaves it into the chasm of his heart.*

--Rainer Maria Rilke

arm of the chair

I'll sit here, Dad, watch tv
from your lap, the arm of
the chair. Tell my sister to sit
on the floor, the couch, she's
older, bigger, doesn't need
the strength of your arm.

I'll stroke your hair, long
and curly in the back, pull
that one grey
strand.
Can you see tv
with hair in your eyes? I'll get
ribbon for that almost-ponytail,
brush it right before
I go to bed.

Pip your cigarette while
you blow smoke rings. Beer and
tobacco breath, Old Spice. Did you
go to the tavern on your way
home? Mom saved
your dinner in the oven.

You want fresh water, lots of ice
the way you like? Those flowers
need water, too. Won't bother
the nurses,
I'll get a cold cloth, wipe
your face off. Is that tube uncomfortable?
They should be more careful
when they put needles in.

I'll sit here, watch your chest rise
and fall, saline drip, eyes in comatose REM,
brush your hair with my fingers, and
watch tv on the arm
of your chair.

an ordered life

For forty years, your focus was on deadlines
for headlines, number of words/minutes
in story, not losing
concentration, interest, enthusiasm
for project or subject. Swiftly,
proficiency enabled free thought, pushing
through tasks less interesting, routine --
a genie-like movement from place
to place, subject to subject.

Speed slows, waiting
for the coughing to stop, removing
tubes long enough to shave four-day
stubble. Focus on temperatures:
do not scald, do not freeze. Precision
is eight pieces of ice in water for the perfect
drink, is toast lightly browned with butter and jam, a four
minute egg, is delegation of cheque-writing, timely
bill payments. The importance of small
issues becomes familiar, comforting,
disconcerting.

drip, drip, drip

2.2 cc's of morphine
by mouth, intravenous with
a 20mm needle, and saline
to re-hydrate papery skin.

Stream of uniforms, endless repetitive
questions -- who you are; why
you're here. *What seems
to be the problem, dear? Eighty
years old, are you - are you retired? Do
you know you have cancer? You
reply that you're old, not stupid;
sick, not dead
yet. The uniforms' bureaucratic
nonsense prolongs the pain, waiting
for a bed, more drugs.
Palliative care is full, dear. You'll have to wait*

until someone leaves. You know you'll most
likely die before there's room.

drip, drip

Balance your desire to live, see
grandchildren one more time, kiss your
wife and hold her hand,
with the indignities of bedpans, being
treated like a child, a golf ball grown to the size
of your fist filling your lungs, pain that stops
your breath.

Abdicate decisions

drip

Your ordered life, once controlled
by obsessive planning, hours
of thought directed at minutiae, decision-making to permit
the appearance of simplicity, some small
moments of freedom, governed
now by your youngest child
left only with
the guilt of *do not resuscitate*.

vacancy

No one knew (he had refused
to admit it himself) that his strength was gone,
morphine gave him the rest
he fought against, a drug-induced
comfort. He wouldn't wake up.
A man/shell with a half-grin
caught in a baby's gaseous bubbling
workings of death, vacant
eyes, unresponsive to questions,
nerve movement
jerking legs and arms.

He may just need some sleep, the doctor said,
be fine by tomorrow. Let
him rest. The family listened,
heard what they wanted, took
hand spasms as affection, as his
answer *I love you, too.*

I was there all day, heard
the breathing change from shallow
to deep.

Are you sitting down? Bad
news is easier sitting
down. The doctor called
peaceful, he said
asleep, he said
gently on the wings
of an angel, they said.

Shut up, I said.

broken glass remarks

Our differences – seldom
deeper than a film
of water on plastic for
seal-like children –
contained

keep us
from broken-glass remarks
long enough to acknowledge mutual
loss

Ancestral ties
that kept
us attached
stretch
fine

like Donne's airy thin
gold, once held

by Dad's bear-paw hands
now dust

touched

that small part of you
meeting with the small
part of my mother formed
a single cell dividing
exponentially

I grew and became
someone else,
your partner in difference
trying to find my own way,
determined to prove I
was not you: a kinder, gentler
version of the father. I was
Ulysses, became part
of all who touched me
and whom I touched

but not by you.

Against my will, I grew into you –
opposed to arrogance, stubborn with opposition,
passionate about dishonesty.

In your last weeks, we moved slowly
towards acceptance: no theatrics, no epiphanies.
No way to liberate you from suffering
in public or private as I watched
you struggle
for breath, release from
pain for us both

your moving
into spirit released
mine

I heard laughter

Truth is, I was afraid – afraid I'd see him wasted and helpless, and remember him like that. Not the man on whose toes I stood while we danced to Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman, the strong man who took me on picnics, the gentle man who let me brush his hair when he was trying to watch television, the critical man who didn't accept the changes in my life. I was afraid to tell him why I put the pillow over my head, let his cries for help wake my mother – better to pretend I was exhausted from the day's work of looking after him, trying to coax his appetite, make him feel more comfortable. He knew, but he was afraid too. Afraid I would force the issue and talk about death instead of life.

He kept saying "Jacob Two Two" when I took him to hospital that last time. He hadn't read the book, just thought the name was funny. We weren't having much fun then. He would say, *Jacob Two Two Meets the Two-Hooded Fang*. We would laugh. I thought he was knocked out from the morphine while we were waiting in emergency for a bed upstairs. I put my forehead on cold steel bars, closed my eyes for a few minutes. His hand, that great big paw, enveloped the top of my head. He stroked my hair: *I'm glad you're single now – you can look after me*.

Six months later, a wake later, a burial later, I was rushing around trying to fill hours, complete a degree, support my family. I heard a voice saying, *Jacob Two Two*, plain as day right next to my ear. I don't believe in ghosts, but I heard his voice. I borrowed the book from the library, telling amused friends I had a sudden interest in children's lit. He was sending me a message. A message about being the youngest, about not being heard, about nightmares, about being loved – all the things I lived. Then I heard laughter.

at another reading

The first poet scared
the hell out of me, depressed
me. I wanted to run
home, bury myself under
the duvet, call my mother,
ask her if she loved
me. No, really, really
loved me. I know she'll say
yes, but it won't be enough
because I'll still be scared
from those short poems of blood
and birth, sickness and death, babies
and fathers.

I'd like to read my poem
to Mom, one about Dad, not hiding
how much I love him, still
miss him, knowing
she'll think I've gone
crazy, been possessed by the devil
for hearing voices (just Dad's
actually). She would understand
picking up the phone, ready
to call him for a recipe, one
that only he could remember, spent
hours concocting, messing the kitchen
while she paced, nagged, bustled, cleaning
around him until he sent her from the cramped
area with a cold *Schooner*, the last frosted
glass from the freezer. She would sit
in his chair – only to drink
the beer – rustling the newspaper, commenting
on war stories, bad writing, deaths
of old friends. The late
afternoon sun would strain to enter
the living room through orange
gauze curtains she had made, he had hated
simply because they were
ugly. Over Dad's feast, they would argue
about money, health, the messy
kitchen, Mom rising

to get tea and dessert for him before
she had finished eating.

I wonder what she does
now, no arguments flavouring
meals, slow afternoons when
she wakes from her nap
and he's gone.



Clary Pottie and Lucie Pottie jitterbugging
in the woods at Brookside, N.S., (ca. 1945)

sepia-toned

I recognise the back,
the profiles, saddle-shoes, daddy-long
legs as you swing together in a birch
bark clearing over
roots, rotting leaves, lumber
to finish the cottage. Where
was the music?

*You're always working – can't
you spend more time with
us, less time at work and
the tavern?*

Uncle Charlie said the yacht
club used to rock on Fridays, Saturdays,
swing music with Tommy Dorsey. You'd
come home suit sweat-wet from non-stop
swing, dance competitions won with
the chatty blond dynamo a good foot shorter
than you. Pained by arthritis, you'd crawl
into bed, sleep for a few hours before
covering baseball games, curling
tournaments for the Herald, ready by
eight to jitterbug into the night again
with your soon-to-be-wife.

*You never clean the kitchen when
you cook – do you think I
was put here to wipe up
the mess you create?*

Days before transistors, battery-operated
CD players, music came
from pots beat in the kitchen, friends
with guitars, fiddles, wax paper over
combs. Kitchen parties moved
to dining rooms where the upright
stood against the wall, chairs
and floors filled to capacity with family,
friends of all ages, home-made
music so loud my brothers and sister

danced rooms away on hardwood floors.

*Turn up your hearing aid, I'm
talking to you. Stop
ignoring me.*

I used to wonder why
you stayed together, fifty-six
years of fights, recriminations, sickness,
sadness; why your children didn't inherit
your strength, resolve, let their partnerships
dissolve when fighting became too
intense, too physical.

*Don't play sad songs at my wake;
play only the music we love. It's a sin*

*to love anyone
as much as I love you.*

Nightmares

end of term

Last week I ran
away from home and joined
the circus. I was the corpulent clown
stuffed into the Austin Mini, so big
three clowns were pushing
my ass, size 20 shoes in the way. I fell back
like a rubber band, crushed
the other clowns, the colours of their suits
splattering the tent canvas: red,
yellow, blue.

I was Dumbo, flew around
the Big Top, ears flapping, creating
a tornado scaring children and parents. Above,
I watched, flying
loops around tent poles. They ran out
to the side-shows where I sat
behind steel bars smiling
at pointing, gasping people. No mirror,
I reached up
to smooth my hair.

The snakes bit me.
Three flat clowns in an ambulance opened
the door to my cage, put
the snakes on the stretcher, took off
with sirens blaring.

rounded corners

When the lights go out, June
bugs whiz and crash at the window
while earwigs crawl into dark,
wet spaces. Long-fingered
shadows from the window reach
under the pillow, leaving
slugs from the toothless
fairy, her scraggy arms bang
against the window, demanding
entrance. Noises magnify.
No longer extinct,
Tyrannosaurus Rex bellows
– he, too, wants in.
The rocking horse grows fierce teeth,
and bucks, trying to trample
while the bear's glassy-eyed stare freezes
into a menacing scowl.
A radio plays softly,
trying to dispel corners
rounded by darkness,
out of tune, out of beat
with the witch and Rex
still banging and roaring
at the window.

cod liver oil

I was caught hiding cod
liver oil capsules under the joists
of the dining room table, my mother, forced
by authorities, sent me to Children's
Court. Sentenced to a year in the reformatory
for wayward children, I slept in
a dorm – rows and rows of beds for
other capsule refusers -- all of us
wicked, unrepentent, unreformable.

By day, we watched movies of other
evil children, their bones so weak
they couldn't play, climb trees, missing
some teeth, the rest falling
out -- one or more at a time. Other
children joined the refusers, those who
had chewed gum or talked
in church, said *no* to parents
and teachers, ate candy in bed
or just before mealtimes. Two days
a week, we ate porridge and cooked
vegetables (Brussels sprouts and canned
peas) all day; every meal accompanied
by cod liver oil. No food
until the capsule was swallowed (no joists
under those tables).

We saw our parents through
fences once a month; they brought more
vegetables and capsules. It was
for our own good.

I plotted an uprising, an escape. Banding
together, we overpowered the guards
in our dorm, slipped through the grandfather
clock to freedom. My parents, glad I was
restored to home, declared freedom
from eating the blasted pills, healthy
enough to grow up, climb trees, run
without vitamin supplements.

My strange dream didn't always
end well -- sometimes I woke up
before the escape when the guards
were forcing me to eat, sometimes I fell
from the clock into
a vat of cod liver oil. My children
loved cod liver oil, porridge, cooked
vegetables, though not
Brussels sprouts.

nothing to declare

I bought my first bra on
the trip from Fredericton to
Montreal, my mother deciding
the two bumps under my shirt
were finally large enough to be
contained, trained in a WonderBra
I hoped, remembering Seventeen
and Glamour, the cones of awe
and corner-eye glances of tanned
male paper dolls. A 38-D perfect
for eleven-year-old breasts I had seen
in sideways wall shadows, sunlit window
reproductions, bathroom mirror reflections.

We took the shortcut through
Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont stopping
at Woolworths. I looked in boxes
of ribboned, pillowed, laced, three-
quarter cupped instruments of sexual
discovery, while my mother sifted
through bins of plain, white flesh
containers, no frilly straps, no lacy
padded cups; white cotton holders
sized "small," written in loud

black: TRAINING.
My mother's omnipotent eye calculated
32AA correct. Paid for, she insisted
I wear the white passionless straight
jacket as we drove to frontier
crossings with nothing to declare
but a new training bra. Concealed
under a blanket, my dazzling
humiliation lit the way. Dressing
the next day, my big sister saw
furious red striations around my back,
shoulders, heard the story of supreme
decisions, loaned me her 34B.

sabotage

I

I bought you the book on rough skin,
hoping to keep you from falling for
an unworthy man.

II

You left, moving
out of your mauve ruffled
childhood before I had
the chance to sabotage
your dreams.

Your sister told me
you were gone, the fourth
or fifth departure of the day:
the grandmother of a friend
just before his return from Out West;
a child worn by life at 10; the former politician
wasted by the creeping disease;
and you. Checking

into a hotel to avoid
my lectures on mixing vodka and Tylenol,
you collapsed in the foyer –
a plush, quiet box now encompassing
your sweet face, lips
curved in a permanent smile.

Images of your departure
crowd my mind where
epiphanies bubbled and danced,
words I need to describe the pain
rushing like spring thaw.

III

My return to consciousness is slow and painful.
Someone in another room is crying.

I realise my nightmare of your death
is just that, but the horror of moments
before 8:30 a.m. remains all day.
I call to hear your voice; your sister's
"She's in the shower" calms me.

My premonitions move me to resolve that
I will take more time to listen
to your dreams.

IV

The unworthy man moved
you to the Mainland. You
anticipated my objections, leaving
while I was out.

genetic mirror

Why do I
see only my weaknesses
in the genetic mirror that is your face?
Tipping our head, spilling
feelings of guilt, or believing
we acted stupidly, accepting a toke,
or arguing when we know we're wrong.
Unable to face
responsibilities, procrastinating
because we work better under
pressure. Did I
pass these liabilities
into your DNA?

In our eyes: the dark chocolate
reflections conceal
the fear of being rejected. Working
while the sharp, flashing
knives of migraines signal
stop.

Yet we continue
to push to accomplish and dazzle,
receive commiseration
and praise, the motivating
fuel, while our other personality
bottles emotions like cheap
champagne, exploding in a sparkling,
ugly mess on walls and floor
for someone else to clean up, the stain
the faint smell that's slightly
off: remembrance of
a fear of

discovery that what lies
behind the smile, the dimple
are lines we might
forget onstage
one day

the clarinet

Gold and matte black, sounds
and images produced by background
piano chords and sharp, shocked breaths
of life from the slim cylinder into
a dead musician's cantata. Her clarinet a pen
writing film scripts, a Fantasia while the apprentice hides
from the Sorcerer as he watches
brooms carry too many
pails of water, over-
flowing, gushing down the steps,

scales of music pouring, clunking stops,
sliding from the fingers up
and down my spine. Woodwind

whistles through, around
the room, scales
weigh in at the finish, heavy
with my words
the music ate.

broken body

Early morning calls
never tell good news – my mother's scream
in '67 woke me to news of my brother's broken
body – motorcycle madness on the Metropolitan
boulevard. Doctors said he'd never walk
again. Parents in Montreal, I stayed two
weeks with elderly church friends, who
couldn't understand eleven-year-old needs to be
with family in a crisis. Fed me
very old cheddar cheese, hoping comfort
could be found between salted
crackers.

This time, thirty years
later, the phone rang in my dream –
my brother again. This time, his daily
ten-mile walk interrupted by
the stopping of his heart.

3 a.m. phone calls are
never good.

on the plane

Thirty-one thousand feet over
Lake Michigan with the crew
of one-time companions who sleep, watch
movies, talk. Below, white caps on grey change
to dirty white quilts change
to brown-grey and ruddy-red patterns

irregular pie-charts,
fissures, and seams where threads
have broken and unravelled. I fly over

three time zones as deceptively flat
lands are raised by the charcoal shadows
of an ancient artist while the faithful hum
of DC-10 jets sustain
the white monster floating

on a cushion of air. It's not the cushion
that raises fears – maybe it's the pilot's
time to go – my father's reason
for not flying. Asked about leaving
this time, I panicked – not to fly – but to leave
safe confines of apartment, university and friends; go
to where I'll be expected to react, reassure,
return to being a person I don't
recognise anymore.

the way to San José

They say you should talk, read to
coma patients so I'll read Bliss
Carman – good Canadian poet –
to irritate or excite you, comatose
expatriate. Wake up, damn
you. I'll try to bug you awake: Mom's
gonna make you drink prune juice. I'm playing
your records, driving your BMW. Wake up,
damn you, I came all
this way – two thousand miles as
the hawk flies. Wake
up. I listened
to two old ladies' life stories waiting
for my flight. I now know
the way to San José and the song won't
leave my head, damn you. Wake up. See
everything, speak French and German, Japanese
and English, finish your degree, take
Mom to Europe, become as remote
as you were before, oldest brother
living in California.
Just wake up, damn you.



Stephen (Pottie) Pate and physiotherapist
in pool (ca. 1955)

beyond

I open the book, a black
and white childhood,

stare at the solemn four-year-old held
by a white-shirted, grey-crossed woman. Slick
crew cut, pale arms attached
to white knuckles barely
contrasting the pale ring enclosing
bony upper limbs, a missing
lower body concealed by dark grey
ripples.

I turn the page.

Older, maybe seven, still thin, still
crew-cut, still solemn
dressed in starched white shirt,
varying shades of grey in tie, pressed
pants, held this time by a dark
be-medaled man, his uniform the cut
of 1950's Navy. The story behind
the balloon in the slim
fingers told of circus barkers, bearded-ladies,
fire-eating men the child was too
young to see, the balloon a compensation.

I turn the page.

Twelve, holding a first fish while
the family friend applauds from the sidelines. A flash
lights the evening sky, the scales, a backdrop
of black pine and fir trees, a campfire
to the right. A faint taste of smoke and charred
trout skin rolled in cornmeal. Dozing in a bag,
Stan the friend taught constellations -- North Star,
Ursa Major, Big and Little Dippers.

I turn the page.

Captioned: *my first summer on the Drake Farm.*
A gaunt teenager sits at the wheel of a tractor, barn,

cows and fields in background. Not seen: feeding
and milking twice a day; gathering eggs from
pecking, squawking birds; pulling hard and fast
weeds in the kitchen garden; pitching forks
of hay while dust chokes, forces blasting
sneezes. Rewards were simple: meat
and potatoes, vegetables boiled
until soggy – suppers that filled hollow
stomachs, not the imagination. Mrs. Drake apologised
for the plainness, made up for it with fresh hot
rolls and squares, tops thick
with sugary pink or chocolate icing.
Long days of labour fed
good appetites, not discouraged by sticky fly paper over
the table, the smell of manure through
the open windows, a two-ton fatigue.

I turn the page.

A puberty-thin moustache incompletely covers
the celebratory grin at newly-formed
muscles, a tanned, stocky
youth just returned from summer
spent in the country, clothed in too-tight
t-shirt, faded, cut-off jeans, skeletal left leg
contrasting with the powerful right.

On the farm, I hadn't been a cripple,
handicapped by polio, just another farmhand
capable of being pushed beyond the artificial
limits set by doctors, parents, myself.
I emerged
standing.

Reconnect

*I read it here in your very word,
in the story of the gestures
with which your hands cupped themselves
around our becoming – limiting, warm.*

*You said live out loud, and die you said lightly,
And over and over again you said be.*

--Rainer Maria Rilke

the call

I call hoping that fifteen cents
a minute and time will be enough
to hear my voice above
the insecurities of yesterday's shouting.

Instead, your voice is louder
than mine can ever be
despite the distance. I
hang up deciding that alone,
my voice is loud enough
300 kilometres
away

in the name of

In the name of my grandmother I
once played piano to hear her say
your cousin plays in church, asked
for all the weddings. No pleasing
her once presented with girl-twins, she said
your cousin has one of each. Her unmarried
name is my first, following me around hooked
with another my parents thought *sounded*
good. My cousin dropped hers – too much
responsibility living up
to a grandmother's perfection.

In the name of God I attended
church three times a week, knocked
on doors to save souls, sang in the choir, drove
seniors for groceries. Believed all
other religions were
untrue, hoped I'd be virtuous
enough to live
forever in His paradise kingdom
on earth. I filled my time with
good deeds and thoughts so the
devil could not intrude and answer
questions for which there were
no truths, only lies. The truth was
no one could live up to ideals
that high.

In the name of sanity I left
religion, extended family and friends, played
guitar when I wanted
music, swam in the Atlantic, and lay
on a beach thinking
about nothing.

I am

My being, predestined
before that gleam
in my parents' eyes. I chose
them for what they could teach
me, what I could teach
them – a bonus
in the osmosis of ideas.

My mother's continued resistance
to my independence, education, shows
no erosion of her barriers
to change
who she is.

My father's final approval, opposing
his old beliefs that I should stay
married and raise children, came
after years of arguments. Conventional
until he was faced
with mortality,
the need for no regrets.

lifeline I

Few cracked, brown leaves still
cling to trees, their lifeline
to hot, humid summers. In
letting go

they will not shine
again in fresh showers, agitate
in breezes, astound
with collective
beauty, shelter stemless Lady Slippers,
flightless tree swallows.

The leaves shudder once more
as gulf winds pry
their sole digit
from the branches. Soon
they will be safe
beneath the blanket of snow:
cold comfort.

lifeline II

Under the duvet's light warmth, I felt
hands and lips, body touching
body, beads of sweat
becoming creeks, a cold space
beside me when you shared
your heat somewhere else.

When you left
the third time, friends
said they would dye
my hair blond if I took
you back again. Sneaked
behind backs when you called
just one more time. In the *coda*, I put
your shirt, toothbrush, photograph with the
puppy-dog looks in closets to be
forgotten – dust bunnies
under the queen-size bed, firmly
resolved *never again*

The camera had captured
a brief truth in your smile; hid
the lingering lie behind
your eyes.

Cold comfort is a fibre
optic lifeline stretching, longer
now than the St. Lawrence,
windier than gusts over the Northumberland
Strait. Unhappy, unstorybook
endings are not my *forte*,
distant *pianissimo* the way I live
separation.

smelling air

I smelled
the air tonight, just
after sunset before
dark. Can't
quite describe
what it was: just an
olfactory remembrance
of damp evenings
on decks, glass
of wine in hand, hint
of fog in the air,
sky so clearly
black I could
reach up, touch
the Big Dipper
and Orion's belt. Still

feel the sun-warmth,
salt-sand on skin,
remember constant
tsch-tsch-tsch
of windless water.

dens leonis

tenacious, ugly
tufted pest
on antiseptic
lawns

yellow sun, a phoenix
returning to spite
destructive solutions,
hoes, persistent
hands

hollow milky stalk
fighting
against un-nature

resistance is futile

insular

Too old for dance bars, too
young for seniors clubs, you hang
in the middle, trying to find
a niche. Young, your differences
kept you from walking, playing tag, constant
moving meant new schools every
18 months. Marriage, children, home would pay
entrance to the secret couple club with strollers,
while boredom, unhappiness, brutality closed
another door. You learned
French for communication with another
side of your heritage but were mocked
for your efforts, left by a succession
of men in two official languages. Return
to the sea, your usual place of repair, brought
no relief except in academia where your age
meant students could be and sometimes
were your children, your age peers the professors impeded
from relationships by professionalism, their
lives. The Island, its own brand
of insularity opened doors for long-time
friends, family; not even a foot
in the door for outsiders like you. Now in your
third *darshana*, you become a forest-
dweller near the cliff and the water,
cajole yourself into believing the preparations
for complete solitude will close
the circuitous route you've
made towards *nirvana*.

five days at a trade show

In Toronto you can taste the water, sit
in a crowded restaurant, be alone. Look down
from the rarefied air of the smokers' section,
diners' faces blur
in ambient light amid the din, hear
hyena giggles fuelled by martinis and Molson,
insipid conversation. Smoke blows up,
caught in silent fans, and you realise
small town fears: no silk, Lauren
or Klein in the suitcase, wrong clothes
for snails in Pernod, shrimp in tomato

sauced, stumbling through hotel corridors,
necessity finally driving you from your room
to check out the trade show scene, set up
the booth for the dog-and-pony-show.

You endure rival camaraderie
the next day, smile, nod,
shake hands, and veil
your remarks to mislead
but not lie. Offer
coffee and cookies to tire-kickers, serving
software on a platter until 5 p.m. closing
to retreat to your high rise box,
room service pizza for one after two
double scotches in the bar.

Lunch with a competitor admiring
your good looks, intelligence, offers
of white wine, pasta, conversation. He wants
the goods but refusing, you get
indigestion and the bill.

The second day you said the first
night was the worst. Four days later and
all those countless new best friends,
you'll wish you could sit alone
and taste the water.

ascii.txt

*Propelled, blue ink curls, dots
splatter and flourish. Meaning
is an "other" dimension. Passion thickens
the curves.*

1 and 0 on micro chips
and flat screens form
Courier New letters
juxtaposition configures
words generating
phrases containing
messages

Straight and regimented, characters
with no distinction s p r a w l
across cold, white
fields. Select a font.

ones and zeros take

shape

ballooning

insert:

Your Text Here

reconnect

Scan and digitally reproduce
signatures. Touch the pixels. Feel the cold
glassy hardness of the screen, check
your hair in the distorted
reflection.

Technology eliminates
continents, extending relationships
through the impersonal ink that
becomes Times New Roman.

Backlight shines on reflected
corneal mosaics and pigments.
Escape from the future to view
the ones that got away, slipping
through the consciousness of your
memory and faded colour photographs
of the sixties. Check the corners
of black construction paper –
the curled corners of black and whites,
tin and daguerreotypes, stiff
necks in high starched collars, points
of light, Impressionist pastels in Orsay,
stern, dark oils lining
vast mirrored halls,
the Sistine frescoes unveiling
temptations, a return
to Eden.

In my repertoire

chrysalis

Make love to me in the dark, where
my mother will not impose
her fears. With a down-
ward snap, a thick
curtain and blankets cover
our nakedness but expose need.

Make love to me at dusk
when the pastels of the Cape sunset
wash our bodies with rose and
sapphire beads. The flickering
campfire reflects eyes, daring,
our naked limbs entwined.

Make love to me in the morning
when sleep still blinds us
to the imperfections of another day.
Sounds of city traffic drowned
by your smell, your touch, love
words whispered, then shouted.

Make love to me at noon
with the sun high, no shadows
to deafen us, just blazing
colours, the smell of musk
and sweet hay, merging
with boisterous gulls.

a transitory state

I watched you walk to your car, loping stride
familiar after fifteen brief years, not
much changed, more grey, wrinkles, and I wanted
to tell you everything of my life in
a one-hour meeting, a Niagara Falls
of history, changes, children, old lovers,
past battles. Say *thank you* for slowing down
the caterpillar, *sorry* for forcing
you to live with cocoon hibernation
before a final emergence after

you, a strangely beautiful moth, tell you
something I didn't realise until
lately: you were too soon before larva,
barely an egg when we merged, a process
of insemination perhaps, still now
emerging from the quiescent pupa,
transitory state before taking flight.

full circle

Come with me and discover
this place of grey, of smoke stacks saluting
the skyline, of asphalt and concrete queues leading

nowhere. Help me see another place, once
a refuge, a welcoming point for people without
freedom who resided across land and lakes, who

came here to find stillness, and found
instead a different slavery based on movement,
noise. As I drive, I'll talk about

nothing while you look out
car windows imagining yourself here, away
from a community that finds itself

everywhere. Imagine turning full circle
past the scenes of your youth to this place where you will exchange
great seas for great lakes, imagining

Saturday afternoons at coffee houses,
drowsing musty bookstores. Discover factory
homes of the formerly bonded that we'll drive

past, imagining wood and brick, fireplaces,
a room to write, to eat, to sleep – not imagining
the sleep, but spooning – legs and warm

breath, daily exchange of confidences
and intimacies. Discover the touch of hand
on arm, lips on cheek. Discover me.

voyeur

I saw her eyes slide
right to him (I supposed) a half
smile to share
complicity about something I
can only imagine. He doesn't see
and her curved mouth fades to a straight
line, a glistening at the corner
of the eyes as she strains further – her
eyes, her mind, almost reaching out her hand – to catch
his eye, then faces
front when he leaves
the room for long
minutes. She slumps
in the chair, turning

back to the door. Returning, he
sits closer to her, closer than the seat
next to the door where
he could slip out easily, bored
by what is being said in
this room. She is not
watching as his eyes slide
left to her, follow
as she leaves. I remain,
a voyeur without focus or subject,
as the door closes.

distant lights

I thought of you yesterday,
moments captured like sound bites: tripping
on the cobbled streets, narrow
sidewalks in Vieux Montréal, kicking
through the leaves on Mont-Royal.

Gazing at distant lights
snaking around the city
from mountain lookouts, embezzled
kisses freely given
in *métros*, doorways while music blares
from clubs on Crescent Street.

Fragrance of fresh baked bagels on wood smoke fires
-- best while still warm -- wind directing
déjeuner sampling to Le Faubourg.

Eavesdrop on accented English and French,
Greek, Arabic, Italian,
the international music
of Montréal.

I still miss you.

leaving I - taking charge

I'm thinking about leaving
this place – not the bookstore
where I sit and its early evening
poetry reading, two tandem voices, a thin
sharing of words, an airy reading
in iambic pentameter,
background muzac devoid
of emotion -- this place where
I seem to belong even
though I'm from away. My space,
once big enough,
narrows

expands in a move towards
Upper Canada for a year, knowing
it might be longer while I try
to fill a space

titles behind the poets provide
the code, my eyes pulled towards
self-help books urging
me to *make the most*
of what I've got, business
section mottoes insist I must
rise up, asking me: *have you made*
your will? You can't take it with you.
Yet with such *amazing grace*, I can have
great sex by reading the jackets,
not the books only if I
take charge of my body.

The reading ends in the last
stanza, noted by diluted applause not
my attention. The books keep talking,
urge me to pack necessities, leave
this place, come back
when I'm ready.

leaving II – down the transcanada

Driving down the TransCanada, 20,
the 401, you – my constant,
navigator, melody with
my harmony, *sous chef*, partner for four
years – are not there. Someone else shares
this trip away to Upper Canada: someone
who doesn't cook, can't
sing, read a map, understand
that the passenger seats are empty,
conversation is hollow, I'm mad
at the world for no good reason.
I don't miss anyone
but you right now. We're taking
different highways.

leaving III - the corner of my eye
for Cara

I started to cry
in Shoppers' Drug Mart last night –
it wasn't anything
big – I hadn't fallen on slippery
floors, hit my funny
bone on corners, stumbled
over misplaced boxes, cut
my finger on rough shelves. It was
just the turn of one's head, the cut
of another's hair (colour by
l'Oréal), a shapely, compact
body about five foot two, dressed
in a blue-striped shirt, navy
pants that caught
the corner of my eye. I was standing
in Cosmetics, Eye Care, Paper
Products wondering what
you were doing, how your day
had been, whether you and your
sister were getting along, had the boy
finally decided he wanted
to get serious.

I received your e-mail: the boy is just
a friend; you're fine, spending time
on-line researching universities
in Montréal. Your sister is driving
you crazy with her up
and down moods, fights with anyone
who crosses her for not buying
hot dog buns, giving her
an advantage at pool.

You'll need a place of your
own; your sister needs time
alone. The move back to school
is the right direction – your intelligence, qualities
shouldn't be clerked away, wasted
on adolescents.

I look at pictures, see the chubby
dark baby, full lips and chestnut
eyes grown into a mysterious
young woman. When the nurse handed
you to me, I called
you *beloved*.

leaving IV - where else?

Where else could you take a boat,
listen to Richard Wood fiddle
his way across
the Strait, be known
by the way you inhale
a *yes* that you belong, by your last
name that you're Liberal, Conservative,
from King or Queen's county.

Could you see the Queen's representative
shopping for sheets and hoes
at Zellers, receive a command
to call him *Gilbert*, an informal
invitation to visit the house
for tea, a reading.

Could you meet someone
you know each time you go
out, know that Saturday's market
will supply espresso for a loonie,
baked goods, fresh veggies, hugs
from friends, talk about new
work with writers, books and gardening
with habitués. Listen to the clarinet
player massacre another song, drop
him some change anyway.

Know that when you leave,
someone will remember your name
who you're related to, realise
you're gone, why
you had to go.

I am a guitar

Not just a regular six string
Aria with soft black case, cheap
plastic snaps, and no inside
pocket for picks and extra strings:

a twelve-string Yamaha.

Pale cream,
the colour of coffee with
too much milk, trimmed with brown --
deep, rich chestnut brown --
the colour of eyes in which you want
to drown and lose your soul.

Long, slender neck, classic,
well-rounded body
and strings -- bronze,
not gold -- too flashy. Just enough
class: understated elegance.

Strummed or picked, I sing
in a harmony only dreamed of:
choirs -- hundreds of trained voices
singing in unison -- bass, tenor, alto, soprano,
one note after another, blending
and lifting, chords of Gs and Cs,

transportation through the thick, lush
leaves of summer trees, beyond
the cumulous elephants and pigs,
to a space
where time, place
do not exist.

Sharps, flats and false notes are
not in my repertoire.
I play love songs.

Vita Auctoris

Lee Ellen Pottie was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She graduated from LeMoyne d'Iberville High School in Longueuil, Québec in 1973. After raising her three children in Québec, she moved back to the Maritimes and attended the University of Prince Edward Island where she obtained a B.A. Honours in English in 1999. She is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in English Language, Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor, and plans to graduate in Autumn 2000.